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ABSTRACT

In its development and in its central character, the value base of social work has a relationship to feminine values. Women possess strong nurturing impulses, a great capacity for intimacy, an ability to empathize, and a tendency to integrate in their thinking and their actions. Women are considered to exercise a predilection for egalitarian relationships and a resistance to hierarchical forms. The day-to-day process of sustaining life has been ascribed, historically, to women. The central values of women throughout time have led to an esteem for the individual, which not only respects the entity of the individual but is also concerned with the provision of an environment which will support and facilitate personal growth. As a consequence of woman's responsibility for the preservation of life, she has developed methods of solving problems which have characteristically avoided the resort to conflict and to violence. There is a strong urge toward survival which has its roots among women. One can find concomitant concerns within the field of social work. The quality of spirituality manifests itself through the caring that is characteristic of feminism and that is central to the profession of social work. Several ethical dilemmas exist within social work; the ethical imperatives of social work meet with some paradoxical impediments in the process of practicing the profession ethically. Certain elements of those dilemmas are especially linked to women. (NB)

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IMPEDIMENTS TO THE FULL REALIZATION OF THE ETHICAL SELF

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IMPEDIMENTS TO THE FULL REALIZATION OF THE ETHICAL SELF

This paper is concerned with elaborating the value base of social work, noting its relationship to feminine values in its development and in its central character. It will also address some of the ethical dilemmas that exist within social work, noting that the ethical imperatives of social work meet with some paradoxical impediments in the very process of practicing the profession ethically. Attention will also be addressed to those elements of these dilemmas which are especially linked to women.

A number of authorities have described the strong nurturing impulse of women, noting its expansive nature, extending to a concern for life and all living things.[1] Caring about others, and caring for others, stem from feminist orientations. Linked to the provision of nurturance is the ultimate objective of such concern. The objective of caring is the achievement of adequacy and capability for independent functioning by the person or group or other entity for whom care has been provided. The parallel to the profession is not exact in that the basis for the provision of nurturance is somewhat different. In the professional circumstance, the provision of nurturance becomes, on one hand, an imperative to be followed, while at the same time, it is a circumscribed response and responsibility that is accepted by the professional. In both the feminist impulse and in the more calculated professional provision of care, an ultimate concern is that such nurturance will have a liberating and growth producing consequence for those who are the objects of such care.[2]

The capacity for intimacy which, in its realization, is linked to relatedness, is a quality that is most highly developed within a feminist

orientation. The universal human need for ties of relatedness has long been noted, and the sometimes dire results of this need remaining unfulfilled have been linked to many of the ills that can afflict people. The seeking for intimacy by both men and women is a phenomenon that is more prevalent and open in present times. The only novel aspect herein is the increased activity and preference by men for such relationships. In social work, the capacity and motivation for intimacy is altered to the extent that, within the helping relationship, there is some qualification of intimacy. What occurs is a relationship that develops in a unilateral fashion which bares the life and person of the client, and to which the social worker has an obligation to respond in a manner that utilizes the created relationship in a special fashion; that is, as the helping relationship. When one makes a comparison between the relationships that are personal and professional helping relationships, the key distinction that emerges is that the professional relationship possesses an ethical imperative that gives priority to the needs of the client.[3] It would be arrogant to suggest that all other caring relationships are marked by and dependent upon total reciprocity. Clearly, there are many that are not. Where these latter relationships do occur, it is by personal choice of those participating. In contrast, in the professional relationship, the social worker has no option but to create and maintain the relationship for the primary advantage of the client and the meeting of the client's needs. Herein is the ethical imperative.

Women possess a greater tendency to integrate, in their thinking and in their actions. It is suggested that constitutionally, women are equipped to think in more integrated fashions than are men, because the corpus callosum, which connects the two hemispheres of the brain, is

larger and more developed in women.[4] This bent toward greater integration is further reinforced by historical precedent. Throughout most of human history, women have been able to experience home and work in an integrated fashion. From primitive times forward, women have been the tenders of the home and the children, while men have been the gathers and the hunters. With the advent of the industrial age, there was a falling away of family oriented economic activity, with a resultant cleavage between work and home. Initially, the accomodation to this disparity was forced upon men. By the present time, there is an increasing demand made of women also to create some distance between home and work. One of the tasks confronting the social worker in aiding the client is to help the client to find common ground between herself and her surroundings, to achieve a sense of belonging, irrespective of the circumstances of her life. The client is thus helped through realizing the integration that provides her with a sense of integrity, a gathering of her strengths to deal more tellingly with her life and future. It is this strain toward integrity which joins the worker and client in common cause. An understanding of the innate, the historical and the sociological forces which underlie and impel this strain provides both clarity and strength of purpose.

The ability to perceive and to feel the experience and emotion of another, the ability to empathize, can be thought of as a feminine attribute. Questions can be raised as to the origin of this quality, and of the means of its transmission. Can we assume its universal presence among women? What are the experiences in life which are reinforcing to the ability and motivation to empathize? Here, again, we note the parallel between feminism and social work. Surely, the ability to

identify correctly the emotional experience of another and to respond in ways that are supportive and which foster change in the client are central to the capabilities of the social worker. How do we make the connection between empathy as a universal feminine trait and its status as a central and consciously utilized quality by the social worker? Is it explained by the simple observation that social work was largely shaped by women? How has it been formalized and conceptualized in such a fashion that it becomes teachable and transmittable to men in social work? In what ways has empathy, as possessed and used by social workers, become something other than the quality universally possessed by women? What are the potential uses of the conceptions of social work regarding empathy that have yet to be realized? Can attitudes of empathy be taught to others? What are the means by which such attitudes might be transmitted to others?

Women are considered to exercise a predilection for egalitarian relationships and consequently demonstrate a resistance to hierarchical forms. It is not that women cannot work well and successfully in hierarchical organizations; they do work well in such settings. The point is that there is a common preference for those relationships which do not adhere to the forms of hierarchy. In the place of hierarchy, one finds a preference for networks. A distinction to be made here is that networks tend to be constructed so that they are not defined rigidly by the boundaries that hierarchy seeks to impose. The rise of women's networks is not the product of reaction to the "old boy" networks found among men in organizations; rather, the incentive to band together within a network and thus create a protective unit is not a new and unprecedented endeavor. If one but traces the recent history of networking, one finds new networks that cross the gender line, and place

women and men together in common cause in efforts to effect some needed changes within organizations. Are we able to see the lines of relevance between the basic feminine preference for association outside formal structure and the ability of women to translate some of these feminine needs into the form that would facilitate their being met from within the work environment? To what extent is the willingness of the individual leader to transact without the protective space generated by hierarchy an important consideration regarding the development of egalitarian relationships? Can we foresee the rise and spread of networks within social work supplanting the dependence upon hierarchical structures? Do we see any evidence that this organizational shift is occurring? What are the impediments upon the development of such egalitarian structures?

There is a quality, usually thought to be feminine in its character and locus, which has to do with the day-to-day process of sustaining life. This commitment has been ascribed historically to women.[5] In its extended form, it has to do with the issue of peace or war. Pacifist attitudes have been thought of as feminine, and violent means of conflict resolution have been viewed as the qualities central to men. (It is of interest to note, in passing, that one group of men who have characteristically held to pacifist values and outlooks have been professional soldiers.[6] These men, despite their extensive involvement in the maintenance of the machinery of war, have, nevertheless, been markedly pacifist. At least one underlying reason is that the professional soldier has the most at risk in the event of actual warfare. Sabre-rattling and bloodthirsty talk are more nearly the behavior of the politician and the industrialist. Even when battle becomes joined, the caring component of the soldier is to be noted, in the activities which

center upon the evacuation and treatment of the wounded and in selfless acts of heroism. It is also noted in policies which set limits upon the exposure of the soldier to peril. No longer are death and injury the only means of leaving the battleground; tours of duty are prescribed and held to. Here, then, one can find the influence and adoption of the basically feminine compulsion to care.)

There is a strong urge toward survival which has its roots among women. One can find concomitant concerns within social work. The blurring of gender lines among those involved in peace movements is mirrored within the ranks of the social work profession. Can it be that caring is a learned behavior, and as such, can be acquired by sons as well as by daughters?[7] Are the peace-inclined endeavors of men in social work to be trusted? Are they one with the endeavors of women? Is there a common thread that runs through all the caring professions? Is there an essential femininity among these professions which is shared by all their members, irrespective of gender?

The quality of spirituality manifests itself through the caring that is characteristic of feminism and which is central to the profession of social work. It is this quality which enables a person to perceive the humanness and relatedness of other persons. Certainly, in social work, it is such perceptions that influence and direct the effective response to another's needs. The development and refinement of the non-judgmental attitude are based upon a spiritual reformulation, wherein the weighing of merit and consequent decision are replaced by a basic attitude of caring. The results of caring are liberation, to the extent that one is

able,[8] through such exercise of spirituality, to advance life and hope. Such spirituality enables one to perceive and experience a common identity with the wide range of human endeavor. It is this quality which reinforces the effectiveness of social workers.

The central values of women throughout time have led to an esteem for the individual, which not only respects the entity of the individual but is also concerned with the provision of an environment which will support and facilitate personal growth. Here, again, the question can be raised as to whether feminism has predetermined the commitment of the profession to a high esteem for the individual. Does the profession constitute a special application of such commitment? Self-realization is a central focus to social work, but what distinguishes this concern from the broader concern of feminists? Perhaps, this is but one point of juncture between values and ethics, wherein we can begin to note the imperatives which direct the professional, and provide her with less latitude in how she honors this expectation. Perhaps a notable and distinguishing characteristic is the obligation that the professional accepts to be committed to the provision of opportunity and support for self-realization for all people, with a special emphasis upon those who are clients.

As a consequence of woman's responsibility for the perservation of life, she has developed methods of solving problems which have characteristically avoided the resort to conflict and to violence. She has developed a preference for and a capability in the use of negotiation.[9] This quality is incorporated into diplomacy (which paradoxically,. has in its most prominent form and application, until recently, been an area of endeavor to which few women were allowed). The

entire human endeavor of peacekeeping has its roots in the feminine quality of caring. This quality of preference for peaceful pursuits has had a widespread effect upon the total of human experience.

The social worker owes an ethical responsibility to a number of persons affected by her professional activity. These include the client, employers, colleagues, third parties and society. Contemplation of these diverse relationships reveals the unilateral character of these obligations. The resolve of the social worker to conduct herself ethically is not always reinforced by reciprocity of responsible behavior by significant others. This reality emphasizes the necessity of the social worker to depend upon sources and modes of self-direction to sustain herself in ethical practice.

The social worker is ever concerned with identifying the risks to which the client is vulnerable, including the risks that may attend the client entering into a professional relationship. The social worker is ever attendant to limiting the effects of possible risk to the client. She does this, not on the basis of personal decision, but rather because there is an ethical imperative to make such provision and take such cautionary measures in the client's behalf. In this, the social worker is responsive to the ancient admonition originated by physicians, but applicable to all professions "to do no harm." There is, then, a strong necessity for the social worker to be ever attentive to the best interests of the client. The client, on the other hand, is not under any such compulsion. The client is free to do as he chooses, even if the

chosen behavior is detrimental to his own best interest. The social worker is further constrained by her commitment to honor the principle of self-determination for all people, and especially for her client.

A further distinction in regard to the obligations owed by the worker to the client is that social workers are bound ethically to do their utmost for every client, for the unlovely and ungrateful client as fully as for the compliant and lovely one. No allowance is to be made for exception to this expectation. While the social worker then must make a uniformly deep commitment to her participation in the professional relationship, the client again, has no compulsion to invest himself so deeply in the relationship and the transaction. He is free to withhold himself and his energies and commitments from the relationship, even, as often occurs, when it is clearly not in his own best interest to do so. He is free, in ways in which the social worker is not, to reject the counsel of the worker, and to seek the counsel of others, and he may do this without the knowledge of the social worker. In some instances, he may seek added counsel endlessly so that the social worker's counsel goes unesteemed and unheeded.

Once the social worker enters into a relationship with a client, she is bound in that relationship until its purposes are realized. The client is under no similar compulsion. He may freely terminate the relationship at any time and without notification. He has no ethical compulsion which would restrain him from doing so. Indeed, the social worker's committed concern for the rights and autonomy of the client constrain her from any actions which would qualify or deny them.

In the professional relationship, the social worker is bound to the truth. Her conduct within the professional relationship is marked by her adherence to the truth. Here, again, can be noted the unilateral nature of the professional relationship. The client has no parallel commitment to truth-telling. He may lie, dissemble, evade, and otherwise fail to be truthful. While his lying may interfere with his achieving a goal sought within the professional relationship, he suffers no further penalty. In contrast, the social worker, by resort to falsehood, risks her good name, and her claim upon the profession.

The social worker is obliged to respect the self-disclosures of the client and treat them with the confidentiality within which professional practice is ethical and effective. The client has no comparable obligation to respect confidence. He may share with anyone the substance of his association with the social worker. In the instance of group endeavors wherein the social worker attempts to create and maintain an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence, any commitment by the client to those conditions is made on a personal basis. This commitment on some occasions depends upon its pragmatic base. If the client believes that it is to his advantage to continue with the group, he is likely to respect the confidences shared with him. If, on the other hand, the client loses or fails to develop the trust that this association is of value, he risks nothing by breaching the confidence. Such behavior by the social worker would warrant sanctions being placed against her, but the client is not subject to any such penalty.

The social worker's commitment to her client of her interest, ability and trust is not made solely to the client, but also to herself, and by extension, to her profession. She is not released from her

obligation to behave ethically by the failure of others. Her ethical behavior does not depend upon the client meeting his obligations. If the social worker should be tempted to behave reactively to the failures of the client, she is restrained from doing so, first by her own inner-directed sense of ethical obligation, and ultimately by the expectations by her professional peers.

The social worker is committed to a set of values and ethics that derive from her identity as a professional social worker. These values and ethics commit her to a stance which is not compromised by location or circumstance. There is much about the individual social worker that is predictable because she is a member of an ethical profession. Since most social workers are employed by agencies, it is important to consider the stress that can occur because the values and ethics of an employing agency may not be identical to those of the individual professional. The ethical standards of agencies and their underlying values are not always synonomous with the ethics and values of the profession.

Agencies come into being, and develop, in response to emerging needs of society. Frequently these needs are not solely the needs of the prospective or actual client population. They may include the needs of the larger community. For example, public welfare agencies do not exist solely to meet the needs of their clients. They also have the purpose of responding to the needs of the larger community for security and stability. The unmet needs of a large and restive population of disadvantaged and deprived people may present a threat to the larger society, which reasonably fears the consequences of the actions of this population, if its needs are neglected. The provision of services necessary to reduce the threat of continued restiveness is not the

quantity and quality of services that would be needed to help such people to move fully into circumstances of total adequacy. Clearly in the instance of public agencies, and to a less well-defined extent in private agencies, the setting of standards of provision for clients is a process that is carried out in legislative and administrative activities which may be minimally responsive to the values held by social workers, at best. The resulting standards may well fall far short of what the social worker regards as sufficient in its provision for the client. The standards applied by the individual social worker in appraising the needs of the client are linked to those of the profession. Agencies typically have a circumscribed area of responsibility and provision which is somewhat narrower.

There can, therefore, occur some disjuncture between the basic assumptions and expectations of social agencies and those of the profession of social work. While both agencies and social workers are ultimately accountable to society, their routes to such accountability may be quite different. The nature and locus of accountability of an agency can be easily discerned. An agency, typically, has an external funding source to which it answers. Most agencies have fairly specific purposes which determine the kinds of activities and services in which the agency and its staff will engage. While there may be some flexibility in the purposes of an agency, these are usually more narrowly defined than is the range of purposes commonly viewed as relevant to the social work profession, and to the total needs of a client. As a consequence, the function of the individual social worker as an agent of her agency may be constricted in comparison with what she views as the total needs of the client. This can bring about some strain between what the social worker views as what is needed by the client, and what the agency is able to

provide for the client. There is, thereby, an agency-determined limitation upon the resources that can be expended upon the needs of a particular client despite the assessment made by the worker, and her willingness to exert herself in behalf of the client. A different complexity that can occur is lack of congruency between the functions of the agency and the capabilities of the individual worker, wherein the worker may be expected to carry out functions that lie beyond her present competencies. This casts the worker in a dilemma between representing the agency and practicing within her own competency. While this circumstance is most likely to occur early in a worker's experience, it is also at that time that the worker is most highly vulnerable in attempting to practice beyond the limits of her competence.

There is, then, no exact correspondence between the ethics of an agency and the ethics of the profession. The opportunity can arise for there to be some dissonance between these two sets of ethics. There are not always, or even often, textbook examples of how one is to resolve such conflicts, if she should confront them. In many of such situations, there may be at least three sets of conflicting interests, those of the agency, of the profession, and also of legitimate self-interest.

Despite the importance of the worker to the client during the time of their active relationship, it must be admitted that this relationship, the professional helping relationship, is not of a kind that occurs freely in nature. Such a relationship is not a common or universal one. Most people go through their entire life experience, including their most trying times as well as their times of greatest triumph and elation, without the concern or support of a social wokrer. They do without social workers, not because of their total self-sufficiency, but rather

because they rely for support and assistance upon others. Even in those instances in which an individual is in a professional relationship with a social worker, frequently there are others with a strong interest in the transactions between the worker and the client. This interest may be made manifest through the insistence by such a third party that he be made privy to the worker client transaction, or even to be made an active participant in that transaction. An example is the parent who is paying for his child's treatment. The parent may ask for detailed information about what is occurring in the therapeutic relationship between the worker and the child. The worker needs always to be concerned with how she is to resolve the conflict that arises from the interest of the third party in the process and outcome of a professional relationship with a client. The social worker needs always to work toward the maintenance and utilization of the relationships and resources that become available to a client from his own "natural" support group.

Not all third parties are in primary relationships with one's client. Increasingly, third parties include those who may be paying for the client's professional services. In the instance of insurance which pays for social services, a company may ask for certain detailed data regarding the nature of the client's problem, illness or injury. These data are utilized as a basis for compensating the professional providing the service. Viewed in one context, this should work well, since it provides a factual basis upon which such decisions are made. On the other hand, much of the data that describe service, such as diagnostic and treatment data, are customarily regarded as confidential, and not to be shared with others. Earlier, we had noted the client's commitment to respecting confidences is a personal one not subject to external control. So also with third parties. When a third party is a business

organization, ethics are further complicated. Not only is there an absence of predictable moral restraint, there is further the counter motive of financial profit, which is a legitimate end for a business organization, against which there seldom exists any well formulated ethical standards to provide balance.

Within the present consideration, wherein each of the sources of impediment to the fullest ethical realization is, at once, an object of responsibility and also a potential source of support, there is thereby created a paradox. Perhaps one of the most salient of these is in relationships with one's colleagues. Confirmation of one's professional self is sought and found to a great extent from within the context of the relationships with these colleagues. Quite often, one's awarness of the competing demands of the needs of clients and the needs of agencies are easily discerned. Competition between clients' needs and the needs of professional colleagues is often more subtle. Nevertheless, such conflict can prove to be an impediment to the fullest realization of one's ethical self. Such conflict may be heightened when one's professional peers are members of other professional disciplines.

When social work is practiced in the host setting of another discipline, the values and ethical standards of that other discipline may prevail in establishing and comprehending the environment. These values and standards may differ with those of social work in both substance and emphasis. Colleagues may ask social workers to participate in some activity, which, because of its pragmatism is regarded as the action of choice. This action may, however, offend the values and ethics of social work. For example, a social worker might be asked by a colleague to carry out a plan for a client, which might not be carried out if it

depended upon the informed consent of the client, because of the likelihood of the client's refusal. Social workers are bound, perhaps to a greater extent than colleagues, to honor a client's right to self-determination. The resulting conflict between the social worker and her colleagues may be subjected to efforts to reconcile difference through resort to the hierarchical authority that exists within an agency or organization. This resort to superior hierarchial position and power is almost certainly to be resisted by the social worker. This can be explained by understanding the feminine character of the social work profession, which possesses a resistance to hierarchical forms and arguments. Preference for egalitarian relationships provides further resolve to such resistance. Acceptance of parity among disciplines may come only with great reluctance by other disciplines. In contrast, insistence upon adherence and recognition of hierarchical relationships among disciplines, with social work customarily being relegated to a subordinate position, is the more predictable outcome or expectation. If there is acceptance of a hierarchy among disciplines, one can anticipate that there will also be a comcomitant expectation of a hierarchical ordering of values and ethics by professional disciplines, and pressure on the social worker to abandon her own ethical standards in favor of less exacting ethical standards of another profession. Here, then, is a place for a firm and resolute stand by the social worker. Social work must found its actions and decisions upon its own ethical base. To accept, instead, a reactive position from the standards of other professions has long ranging consequences, including the lessening of respect for the ethical base of social work, and the acceptance of abridgement of social work's ethics.

Another impediment to the fullest realization of the ethical self of the professional is the larger society which has other priorities and concerns than those that are central to social work. Indeed, the purposes of social work often stand apart from those of the larger society. Paradoxically, even as social work labors to increase the engagement and identification of its clients with the larger society, there are forces within the society which resist this process. Even though the society does make provision for its members, there is reluctance to accord high priority to the needs of clients. There occurs a disjuncture beteen the values which direct social work and the prevailing values of the larger society. Such difference contains the potential for distance and dichotomy. The basically feminine, nurturing posture of social work aligns itself with a basically liberal outlook, and looks to change for the resolution of conflict. In contrast, the larger society, with a tradition of maximum self-sufficiency, tends toward conservatism and seeks the reduction of conflict, not through change, but rather through a defense of and a preference for the status quo. The advances of social legislation and programs, whose continued growth had earlier seemed certain, have now slowed or ceased so that the actions of society, through its government, now bespeak the reaffirmation of older, less caring attitudes of government, which set greater distance between social work and the larger society. These developments constitute a distinct threat to social work, in that its values appear at odds with the prevailing values which direct the affairs of the larger society.

In summary, the impediments to the fullest realization of the ethical self derive primarily from the general nature of ethics within the profession of social work. The relationship of social work to its several constituencies is not unilateral in what is owed by whom to whom, but neither is it equally reciprocal. The greater obligation of the social worker is one with the greater obligation of the nurturant and caring person in whatever life circumstance. The lack of equity in what is owed ethically may be altered through the continued evolution of the profession, but no change in the direction of imbalance is likely to occur. The caring person understands this inequity, accepts it and persists.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert Bellah, et al, HABITS OF THE HEART, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) pp. 40-41; Janet Finch & Dulcie Groves, A LABOUR OF LOVE: WOMEN, WORK & CARING, (Boston: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1983); Eleanor Lenz & Barbara Myerhoff, THE FEMINIZATION OF AMERICA, (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1985); David Morgan, "Men, masculinity and the process of sociological inquiry," Chapter 4 in Helen Roberts, (Ed.) DOING FEMINIST RESEARCH, (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1981) pp. 83-113.

[2]Bellah, op. cit., p. 46.

[3]S. Berline & D. Kravetz, "Women as victims: a feminist perspective," SOCIAL WORK, 26(1980) pp. 447-490.

[4]Leonore Tiefer, "The context and consequences of contemporary sex research: a feminist perspective," in Sue Cox (Ed.), FEMALE PSYCHOLOGY: THE EMERGING SELF, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981) pp. 23-41.

[5]Sharon S. Mayes, "Women in positions of authority-a case study of changing sex roles," in P. Rieker & E. Carmen (Eds) THE GENDER GAP IN PSYCHOTHERAPY, (New York: Plenum Press, 1984) pp. 91-103.

[6]Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State, Cambridge: (Belknap Pres & the Harvard University Press, 1959) p. 79.

[7]Lenz and Myerhoff, op. cit., pp. 179-210.

[8]Alan A. Stone, "Conceptual Ambiguity and Morality in Modern Psychiatry" in Pat Rieker and Elaine Carmen (Eds) The Gender Gap in Psychotherapy, (New York: Plenum Press, 1984) pp. 5-14.

[9]Peter Baida, "Male and Female," American Heritage, 37/1 (December 1985) pp. 20-21.